Gangster school: The role of the school environment in gang recruitment strategies in Port Elizabeth, South Africa

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Gangs and gang violence continue to be serious challenges throughout South Africa, but especially in cities such as Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. In the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, hardly a day goes by without at least 1 report in the local news media about gang-related incidents. Most of the gangs in the northern areas have organised and relatively sophisticated recruitment strategies that they use to recruit new members. Various factors contribute to the gravitation of most youths to the gang lifestyle. With this article I seek to examine 1 of those factors, namely the school environment. I argue that various factors affecting the school environment make it possible for gangs to target school-going youths for recruitment. The article is based on both the literature and the use of primary data from my research into gangs in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. The article concludes with some recommendations on how to combat gang recruitment in the school environment.

Keywords: gang recruitment strategies; gang violence; gangs; Helenvale; northern areas; Port Elizabeth; school environment; stone-throwing subculture

Introduction
Throughout South Africa, gangs have proved to be a significant challenge on various levels in affected communities. Some of the most prolific incidences of gangsterism are found in areas such as the Cape Flats in Cape Town (Western Cape province) and the northern areas of Port Elizabeth (Eastern Cape province). The relationship between gangs and the school environment has received much attention, not only from scholars but also from the highest levels of government. For example, a study by Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) found that almost four in 10 learners cited gangsterism as one of the major causes of school violence in Eastern Cape schools. Furthermore, in 2016 the minister of Basic Education, Angie Motsekga, indicated that gangsterism has a severely negative impact on the education system (Fredericks, 2016).

In an emerging economy such as South Africa, the relationship between education and development cannot be emphasised enough. Unfortunately, the major challenges that hamper education, especially at school level, threaten to retard the much-needed sustainable economic growth of the country. While these school-level challenges are many, I focus on one of the most significant schooling challenges in a particular South African city.

I seek to contribute to the existing discourse on the relationship between gangsterism and the school environment. The discussion focuses specifically on the role of the school environment in aiding gang recruitment strategies. Referring to my research into gangsterism in a gang-affected community in Port Elizabeth, I argue that the school environment forms a critical part of the context of gangs in the target community. Consequently, it is necessary to address the challenges in the school environment that contribute to the successful recruitment of learners by gangs. The discussion concludes with me providing some recommendations specific to the school environment, that could be considered in efforts to address gangsterism. These recommendations are based on the specific context of a gang-affected community in Port Elizabeth.

Methodology
My research into gangsterism in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth focused on the community of Helenvale, believed to be the centre of gangsterism in both the northern areas and the city of Port Elizabeth as a whole. Using a qualitative approach, I sought to investigate the role of the school environment in contributing to the continued prevalence of gangsterism. While the study was social scientific in its methodology and focus, some of the data gathered from the study revealed some relevant insights regarding the link between gangsterism and the school environment.

In the second part of the discussion, I elaborate on the data relevant to the issue under discussion. Specifically, by referring to qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with relevant participants, including members of the Community Policing Forum (CPF) and a senior-level educator, I show how the dynamics in the school environment impact on gangsterism and vice-versa.

Sampling Population
The sample population upon which the findings discussed here are based consisted of nine key participants. All of the participants were selected from within the Helenvale community. The participants included a senior-level educator from one of the primary schools in Helenvale, as well as eight members of the Helenvale CPF.

Ethical Considerations

The nature of the relevant research was prone to ethical challenges. Hence, several factors were taken into consideration. Firstly, it was acknowledged that the topic of gangsterism was a sensitive issue, and, therefore, I took the necessary measures to address this. Snowball sampling was used to identify key participants, and only those who wished to engage with me were interviewed. The necessary informed consent was obtained from prospective participants. Most of the participants included members of the local CPF. Only one senior-level educator was willing to share information regarding the school situation in the community.

Secondly, it should be emphasised that many residents live in a constant state of fear as a result of regular outbreaks of gang violence and related incidents, as well as the intimidation of community members. Consequently, I had to bear this in mind my search for participants, and even during interviews, as some were unwilling to share information that they felt might compromise them in any way. In response to this challenge I constantly emphasised that participants were in no way obliged to respond to any question(s) that they felt uncomfortable with.

Thirdly, my own safety while travelling within the community was an issue. However, this challenge was addressed by identifying a key participant who also served as a guide. This person was well-known and respected in the community by gang members and residents alike, as both a community leader and a religious leader. Also, during periods of violence the participant would inform me that it was not safe to visit the community, hence I was able to avoid becoming involved in potentially life-threatening situations.

Finally, I endeavoured to follow the necessary ethical procedures of the institution with which I was affiliated when the study was initially started. A stringent process of applying for ethics clearance, which is standard practice at most universities, was followed. My application was duly screened by a university ethics committee, and ethical clearance to conduct the research was rewarded.

Literature Review: Outline of the Gang Subculture

In the South African context, as elsewhere, gangs do not exist in a vacuum but are a product of a particular historical, social and cultural context that impacts on and shapes them. In this discussion I focus on gangs in coloured communities that are the product of specific historical and contemporary dynamics that impact on gang formation and development. In areas such as the Cape Flats and northern areas, gangs appear to be endemic to the Coloured[i] communities. Both Jensen (2008) and Petrus (2013) have alluded to the relationship between street gangs and the historical, political and social contexts of the Coloured people in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth respectively.

In the gang-affected communities of the Cape Flats and northern areas, gangs have become a subculture as they have emerged in a context of historically marginalised communities. Petrus (2013:78) explains how the Coloured gangs had adopted the "characteristics of liminality and marginalisation" of their wider communities, characteristics that these communities have inherited historically. These characteristics have influenced Coloured identity dynamics both in the past and in the present, which, in turn, have influenced the growth and spread of gangs. As Petrus (2013:79) argues,

> In the macro context, the external relationships of street gangs to the wider social, political and economic structures of the South African state, reflect the role of liminality and marginalisation in promoting not only the continuation of street gangs, but also the formation of new ones.

The post-1994 context appears to have exacerbated these issues, and has contributed to the growth and spread of gangs in Coloured communities of the Cape Flats and northern areas. According to Kinnes (2000:8), "[street] gangs … have grown considerably in size and stature soon after the 1994 election. They have become more organised.…" As a consequence, gangs in the communities of the Cape Flats and northern areas have become institutionalised. By exploiting the failures of legitimate structures of authority and provision, street gangs have successfully re-integrated themselves in their communities and have assumed a certain degree of control (Petrus, 2013:79–80). Hence, the prevailing context of these communities, shaped by internal and external dynamics, have enabled gang formations to not only emerge but thrive. Gangs are now able to enjoy longer lifespans, and are more prevalent than in the past. Their remarkable ability to adapt and change in accordance with existing conditions makes the gangs a formidable challenge in their communities.

Gangsterism and the school environment in South Africa

In the international context, the relationship between gangsterism and the school environment has been as much a topic of importance as in South Africa. For example, in the United States of America (USA), the issue has been widely acknowledged as an issue of concern, and has subsequently received much attention from scholars (see, for example, Arthur & Erickson, 1992; Burnett & Walz, 1994; Fraser, 2013; Howell & Lynch, 2000; Regulus, 1994; Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris & Sass, 2011; Strandberg, 1995; Struyk, 2006; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). In South Africa, the link between gangsterism and school violence has been well documented in various studies (see Burton &

Leoschut, 2013; Magidi, Schenk & Erasmus, 2016; Mncube & Steinmann, 2014; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). In addition to attracting scholarly attention, the issue has also attracted the attention of provincial and national government, as well as other stakeholders (see, for example, Butler, 2016; Head, 2017; Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, 2017; Spies, 2017; Wicks, 2017). Unfortunately, despite garnering widespread attention at the highest levels, gangsterism in the school environment continues to affect various schools throughout South Africa.

In an emerging economy such as South Africa, quality schooling and education are of the utmost importance. A significant part of ensuring a quality education and schooling for learners is to provide a safe and secure teaching and learning environment. Unfortunately, South African schools have not been able to make these provisions. According to Themane and Osher (2013), South African schools have come under criticism for not creating safe and secure environments conducive to quality learning. In addition, a study funded by both the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), revealed that "[p]oor South African children, who are for the most part Black or Coloured and located in the historically disadvantaged part of the basic education system, are at risk of perpetuating the poverty cycle into which they were born" (Department of Economic, University of Stellenbosch, 2014:18). This makes a quality education even more critical for such children as this may be one of the only, if not *the* only, viable way out of poverty. However, challenges such as gangsterism in the school environment contribute to the lack of safety and security in many South African schools.

Schools in both the Western Cape and Eastern Cape were regularly in the news media due to the disruptions caused by ongoing gang wars on school learners, as well as educators. For example, Fredericks (2016) reported that gang violence negatively affected both learners and educators in various schools in the Cape Flats communities. According to the report, "[s]ome schools … reported pupil absenteeism levels of up to 63 per cent and the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) said it was receiving messages from teachers who were fearing for their lives" (Fredericks, 2016:para. 8). Furthermore, the report indicated that learners were being threatened and recruited into gangs at an early age (Fredericks, 2016). Learners are not only in danger of recruitment into gangs, but may also be targeted for execution as witnesses to criminal acts perpetrated by gang members. In Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape, a schoolgirl was killed in her home in an apparent witness killing which was linked to ongoing gang violence in Port Elizabeth's troubled northern areas (Edwards, 2016).

South African researchers have attempted to identify and isolate the main factors that facilitate the link between gangsterism and the school environment in South African schools. For example, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013:3) investigated school violence in four schools in the Buffalo City district of the Eastern Cape province. Their study found that 37.5% of the participants in the study (learners) regarded gangsterism as a major cause of school violence (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013:5-6; see also De Wet, 2016:4). The study concluded that gangsterism was one of the six "most prevalent forms of school violence" in the schools under study (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013:13). It could be argued that in the gang-affected communities of the Cape Flats or in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, a far higher percentage of learners, and educators for that matter, would regard gangsterism as one of the most prevalent threats to school safety and security.

In another, more recent study, De Wet (2016:1), in support of several other researchers, such as Burton and Leoschut (2013) and Ncontsa and Shumba (2013), argues that increasing violence in South African schools means that schools are becoming arenas for violence, mainly through interschool rivalries and gangs. Citing Harber and Muthukrishna's (2000:424) study, De Wet (2016:1) notes the link between school violence and gangsterism, and that wider social and structural issues in particularly urban township communities have made it possible for gangsterism to flourish. With specific reference to the schools of the Cape Flats, De Wet (2016:2) argues that

> school violence and gangsterism are perpetually linked: gang violence is not only a specific manifestation of school violence, [it] is also the reason for the high levels of violence inside and outside the school grounds, and gang and 'turf' wars define learners and schools on the Cape Flats.

This view supports one that I had raised earlier, namely that in gang-affected communities the link between gangsterism and the school environment is far stronger. This does not, however, imply that other factors may not be influential, but it does stress the significance of the relationship between gangsterism and the school environment.

Background Literature: Gangsterism and the School Environment in Port Elizabeth

The northern areas of Port Elizabeth have become notorious for gangsterism and related problems in the affected communities. It is particularly the neighbouring communities of Helenvale and Gelvandale that seem to be the hardest hit by gangsterism and gang-related violence. As argued earlier, the prevalence of gangsterism in these communities has an indelible effect on the schooling environment. For example, Butler (2014) reported that on 14 April 2014, six gangsters entered the premises of Gelvandale High School, pointed a gun at a teacher, and then stormed an office where one

of their members was being questioned by staff. The report further stated that, as a direct consequence of the incident, the school, which accommodates 1,360 learners, was closed for at least 3 days.

In addition to the gangsterism threat, schools in the northern areas were also impacted by other factors such as staff shortages, general neglect by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and resultant protests that led to many schools being shut down. Some attributed these issues to the impact of gangsterism. Sesant (2014a) states that the threat of gangsterism has been cited as one of the reasons why it has been a challenge to fill teacher posts at some Port Elizabeth schools. The shortage of teachers led to frustrated community members embarking on protests, some of which turned violent. In July 2015, violent protests occurred in the northern areas as a result of the closure of 33 schools due to a lack of teachers (Pinyana & Witten, 2015). In response to the protests, the then Democratic Alliance (DA) leader in the Eastern Cape (now Executive Mayor of Nelson Mandela Bay), Athol Trollip, stated the following:

> The fact is that schools in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth have been notoriously neglected, and parents cannot tolerate this affront to their children any longer. These schools are dangerous places, where gangsters and criminals prey on children because school safety is utterly ignored. (Pinyana & Witten, 2015)

The impact of the above factors on learners was significant. Some schools prevented learners from writing exams because of the protests (Sesant, 2014c), while the DBE was slow to react to the school crisis (Sesant, 2014b), leaving learners in limbo, as they were unable to attend school. Hence, it is not only gang intimidation of learners and teachers (Van Aardt, 2016), but also structural and institutional factors that conspire to impact negatively on schooling in the northern areas. It is this context that enables the school environment to become a viable and sustainable pool for gang recruitment.

Gangsterism and schooling in Helenvale

In the Helenvale community of Port Elizabeth, gangsterism has become so endemic that it could be considered a part of the social structure of the community. Research into gangsterism in Helenvale revealed, among other things, that in a poor community such as this, "street gangs have succeeded in … establishing themselves as critical institutions of provision …" (Petrus, 2013:79). This means that gangs have been able to become institutionalised in the community, making it very difficult to completely eradicate them. Furthermore, their ability to adapt to the micro- and macro-level conditions of the community and wider society enables them not only to survive, but to thrive. The discussion below highlights some of the findings

gathered from my research into gangsterism in the Helenvale community.

The context of gangsterism in Helenvale

Helenvale is considered by many to be the centre of gangsterism in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. Local news media carry almost daily reports of gang violence and related crimes occurring in Helenvale. This has been the case especially over the last 5-year period (see for example Butler, 2014; Gillham, 2018; Sain, 2017; Wilson, 2016, 2017). As a result of historical and contemporary factors, the community is characterised by high unemployment, overcrowding, poverty, social problems and violence, to name a few. Consequently, the environment is highly conducive to the emergence and flourishing of gang formations.

The school environment

Several schools serve the Helenvale community. In Helenvale itself there are three primary schools, while Gelvandale Senior Secondary School, in the neighbouring Gelvandale, services both Gelvandale and Helenvale high school learners. Hillcrest Primary, Helenvale Primary and Bayview Primary make up the three primary schools. As discussed earlier, the last few years have seen both learners and staff faced with various challenges that have threatened to derail productive schooling for many. The socio-economic conditions in the community, coupled with other external structural issues, have made productive and constructive learning a difficult task.

One major problem is the high drop-out rate of learners, resulting from high incidences of the foetal alcohol syndrome disorder. Ellis (2016) reported on research conducted by the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) in the northern areas. According to the FARR research report, which examined Grade 1 learners in 14 schools in Bethelsdorp, Helenvale and the greater Nelson Mandela Bay area, on average, 130 out of every 1,000 pupils had foetal alcohol spectrum disorder [FASD] (Ellis, 2016; see also Wadvalla, 2016). Research on the neuropsychological and behavioural effects of FASD revealed that "[e]xposure to alcohol in utero is associated with cognitive impairment in various neuropsychological domains, including overall intellectual performance, … learning and memory, … academic difficulties, and increased rates of psychiatric disorders" (Mattson, Crocker & Nguyen, 2011:81).

Consequently, many children who enter the school system are already at a disadvantage, and when they are unable to progress any further in their schooling due to learning difficulties, they may drop out, and become easy targets for recruitment into gangs. The high numbers of children who have learning difficulties, as reflected by the extent of the

FASD problem in communities such as Helenvale, ensure that gangs have a steady supply of potential recruits, as there are very few viable alternatives for youths who are unable to complete their schooling.

Theoretical Framework

Most theoretical perspectives on gangs have been located in two main approaches, emanating from sociological and criminological paradigms. The subculture of violence approach focuses on the values and norms of street gangs that emphasise aggressive and violent behaviour. Popularised by criminologists, Wolfgang and Ferracutti (1967:158), in the subculture of violence theory they argued that "overt expression[s] of violence … is part of a subcultural normative system, and … this system is reflected in the psychological traits of the subcultural participants." Individuals who become part of the gang subculture are socialised into the norms and values that underpin this subculture. Thus, values and norms such as aggression, violence, loyalty to the gang, respect for the gang hierarchy and street credibility are internalised by gang members and reinforced within the various rituals and practices within the gang.

The second main theoretical approach used to understand gangs and gang behaviour is called the routine activities approach. First developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), routine activities theory identifies three key elements required for a crime to occur: a motivated offender; a suitable target/victim; and the absence of a capable guardian with the ability to prevent the offender from committing the crime. At risk youths who end up joining gangs meet all three of these criteria. Firstly, they are motivated to participate in criminal activity because of the wider socio-economic context of their communities (see the earlier discussion on the context of Helenvale as an example). Secondly, within their communities, suitable victims or targets are readily available, thereby creating more opportunities to become involved in criminal activities. Thirdly, the high rate of parental absenteeism (often resulting from other social problems such as high teenage pregnancies, domestic violence/abuse, and fragmented family structures) often means that youths most at risk of joining gangs or engaging in criminal behaviour do not have capable guardians who can intervene and prevent them from committing crimes.

While the above approaches are indeed influential in making sense of gangs and gang subcultures, neither approach adequately explains the relationship between gang subcultures and the school environment. Thus, in order to broaden the scope of these theoretical approaches, I also include Vigil's theory of "street socialization" (2003:230), which locates street gang subcultures as resulting from the failure of social institutions such as families, schools and law enforcement agencies to exercise social control. Marginalised communities, such as Helenvale, are characterised by dysfunctional social institutions. The poor schooling environment, plagued by various infrastructural and structural problems (as discussed further below), is unable to provide positive socialisation for school-going youths. Consequently, this role is taken over by the gang, where the youths are then socialised into adopting and internalising the gang's values and norms.

Discussion of Findings: Some Research Results

The institutional and structural problems affecting the school environment in Helenvale were confirmed by a senior-level educator from one of the primary schools in the area. The volatility of the community meant that an abnormal environment for schooling had been created. In addition, the participant emphasised that the lack of important resources contributed not only to the inability to provide learners with a quality education, but also, by implication, contributed to the gang problem:

> *The school does not get much financial support as it is a 'no fee' school. The Department* [of Basic Education] *largely controls our financial resources. The school has no library, no lab, no facilities for special needs learners, and no computer room. A part of the school was damaged by a fire. The Portfolio Committee* [on Basic Education] *has visited us twice but nothing came of it. This is why many of the kids feel that it is better for them to be outside in gangs.*

Furthermore, the educator also indicated that attracting and retaining teachers was a major problem:

> *One teacher had money stolen out of her bag, and refused to return to school. There are regular gunshots heard around the school and some teachers fear for their safety. We can't even have fundraising events due to safety concerns. The situation has been out of control over the last 5 or 6 years. Teachers don't want to teach here.*

The difficult conditions under which educators have to work had taken a toll on some teachers, including the participant. There were high levels of teacher absenteeism, while the participant admitted to being placed on sick leave due to stress for a period of 6 months.

When asked what could be done to improve the schooling environment, the participant stressed the following:

> *Education is the key. We need good quality facilities that kids want to go to. Appoint social workers and psychologists because the schools and the community need them. There is a huge problem with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, but there are no special needs facilities. Politicians need to work together and stop the political in-fighting.*

In addition to the above, research participants comprising of members of the CPF, as well as former gang members, alluded to another major problem in the school environment that contributed

to gangsterism. It appears that another subculture co-exists with that of gangsterism. This subculture was referred to as the *klipgooi* or stone-throwing subculture. This subculture was described as occurring at school level, where male learners engaged in a game of throwing stones at each other. They typically organised themselves into groups and engaged in the practice of throwing stones at each other. Petrus (2017:46) found that there was a link between the stone-throwing of groups of boys at school and the gangs. When members of one group are harmed by those of a rival group, the conflict escalates into violence. The gangs take an interest in these conflicts as they tend to take sides with rival groups, and seek to recruit those boys who show *plak* [guts or bravery]. As one former gang member indicated, "[g]angs start with the stone-throwing [sub]culture. Kids involved in this are recruited by existing gangs" (Petrus, 2017:46). In addition, participants of the CPF confirmed that retaliatory violence occurred between rival groups. A member of the CPF executive leadership stated that "[w]hen boys get hurt, retaliatory violence occurs between the groups. The larger gangs become involved [since they] use this conflict to recruit the boys into their gangs" (Petrus, 2017:46).

The situation described above illustrates that the school environment in Helenvale provides a viable pool for gang recruitment. Boys learn at school level about the value-system that underpins the gang subculture. By means of the stone-throwing subculture, boys learn about loyalty to the group, retaliation against rivals for harming or disrespecting a member of one's group, and using violence to establish authority, all of which are values underpinning the gang lifestyle (Petrus, 2017:46). In addition, groups that form at school level may even develop into a fully-fledged gang formation, either while the boys are still in school, or once they decide to leave school. This was the case for a gang which called itself the *New Kids*. According to Petrus (2017:47), these youths were involved in stone-throwing at school, and formed a group for protection. They became a solidified group that eventually developed into a gang once they left school.

The school environment, thus, forms the basis for a subculture that exists in a symbiotic relationship with the gang subculture (Petrus, 2017:46). Both of these subcultures are influenced by the wider social structure in which they exist. It is evident from the above that, school boys learn about the key values underpinning the gang subculture while in the school environment. Hence, the environment serves to reinforce the existing value-system that will eventually lead most of these youths into the gang lifestyle. The significant weaknesses in the wider school system exacerbate the environment that pushes the youths towards gangsterism. The lack of teachers, poor facilities and infrastructure, problems with resources, lack of safety, lack of resources for special needs learners, and various other factors all conspire to create an environment that encourages youths to join gangs.

Conclusion

With specific reference to the school environment, I have shown that addressing the context of gangs is as important, if not more so, as addressing the gangs themselves. Consequently, the gang issue should not be treated only as a law enforcement or crime issue. I endeavoured to illustrate how the school environment in a gang-affected community such as Helenvale forms an integral part of the context of gangsterism. It is clear that the school environment in communities such as Helenvale requires urgent attention. This involves multiple levels and multiple stakeholders.

The unfortunate reality is that, at present, the DBE and other stakeholders in the school system are contributing to gangsterism in communities such as Helenvale. This has been borne out in the discussion throughout this article. Recommendations on how to address the identified issues are not novel in any way, as most of them have been suggested repeatedly at various levels. Staff shortages and infrastructure issues need to be addressed as a matter of priority in gang-affected communities. Furthermore, relevant stakeholders should give serious consideration to research-based recommendations, and implement them accordingly. In addition, school authorities would do well to actively monitor rates of gang member recruitment, as well as levels of school violence and drop-out rates. Special needs facilities and resources need to be improved in at-risk schools. Finally, political organisations should refrain from using schools as leverage in political in-fighting, as this directly impacts on the quality of learning and the school environment. If the relevant authorities and stakeholders become serious about implementing these and other recommendations, then schools in gang-affected communities may finally become the schools that they were supposed to be, instead of gangster schools.

Notes

i.   The term *Coloured* is well-known in South African parlance as referring to persons of mixed racial and ethnic heritage. However, the term is more complex than that. Various scholars, including Adhikari (2004, 2006, 2008) and Petrus and Isaacs-Martin (2012) have elaborated on the complexities inherent in Coloured identities.

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